

Basic Needlepoint

To my surprise, the seat was not ice cold, but in fact still warm from the last occupant. I shuddered at the thought that it was the gargantuan man who shoved past me only moments ago as I entered the bathroom. I shifted my weight, causing the bells at the ends of my hat, shoes, and belt to jangle. Water whooshed to my left and in front of me almost simultaneously, and I welcomed the sound; for I had begun to cry. Not because I was dressed mostly in green with bells on my toes, or even because I wore a sticker that read, "HI MY NAME IS NEEDLEPOINT." Truthfully, this was the best job I'd had in weeks. Sure, the hours were long, but I got a discount at almost any store in the mall. It wasn't the actual job that sent streams of salt laden water down my face. It was the fact that this *was* the best job I'd had in weeks. *Why am I being punished?* I wondered as I smeared mucus from my nose to my cheek with the heel of my right hand. *Where did I go wrong?*

It was only a few months ago that I was happy. I had a job, I had just become a father, and my wife loved me. Sure we had our differences, and money was sometimes tight, but life was infinitely better than it is now. *Why do they have to make secretaries so attractive? And why doesn't lipstick come off the skin easier?* I asked myself pathetic and rhetorical questions while people came and went about their business. My mind wandered to a time when I was content with life. There were no questions of how I was going to make it to next week, or why minimum wage was so...minimal. The only thoughts in my mind were about what was the next step, what adventure could I embark on. Now, here I sit, holiday cheer and all, wasting the last of my three 15 minute breaks of the day to cry.

The hot streams reminded me of the day my son was born. I had cried then too. The day had started out like any other. The alarm screamed Howard Stern at us at 6:30, and my wife slammed the snooze button until 6:45. We had our usual breakfasts and went our separate ways. Me to the office, and her to exercise class; she had taken a maternity leave for the last month of her pregnancy. At about 1:25, I had been involved in a very important and aggravating meeting between the photocopier and myself when Sally, *the* secretary, slunk up behind me and grabbed my ass. I dropped the stack of papers I had clutched in my right hand. Not because she surprised me, (she had a bad

habit of just this sort of friendly office interaction) but because she said, “Your wife went into labor.” I swept up the papers and left the saucy blonde holding them. I rushed out the door, almost forgetting my jacket on the rack. When we brought Seth home, I was so proud. For once I hadn’t screwed something up. He was perfect.

The alarm on my watch ripped me from my dream state and I found that my legs had fallen asleep. I tried not to jingle too much as I stood and carefully pulled my green tights back up to their suffocating height. The water spun clockwise behind me as I unlatched and walked out of the stall. As I headed for the exit, a congested voice admonished, “Hey, you gonna touch kids after touchin’ yerself Needlepoint?” The point was a valid one, but my ears burned at being scolded by someone named “Cotton Ball.” I turned to face the source of my newest gripe and grinned hugely while approaching the sinks.

“Thanks.” I said, and gave my hands a rinse.

“Hey, gotta watch out for my elven brethren, right?” He snorted and clapped me on the back before exiting. Visions of sugar plum fairies shoved up his nose danced in my head.

On my way back to “H.Q.” (which is what we have to call the smoking/meeting area) I passed some young girls in too tight clothing with makeup caked on their faces arguing with boys the same age. I caught a snippet of their debate as I pass.

“He did too hit on me! AND, he’s a ninth grader.” The one in a white-cropped shirt with the word “Princess” emblazoned in sparkles across her barrel shaped pre-pubescent chest stated.

“Nuh-uh!” A boy wearing a backwards cap answered. He apparently didn’t believe her, or did, but wanted to continue fighting. I heard the squabbling continue behind me, but didn’t catch any more.

I sigh to myself at the state of today’s youth. When I was their age, I didn’t hang out in a mall wasting my life. I did that elsewhere, like in front of the television. These mall girls are a strange sort. They come in several stages, like a lobster or fly. But they all are tiny skinny things with Mudd or Lei blue jeans vacuumed to their legs and pony tails flying behind them as they race from Contempo Casuals to the Gap. The older ones

come complete with teased hair, gold name necklaces, and swinging walks. All day these kids try their hardest to piss me off. I have a quick flashback to yesterday and I hear their shrill voices echoing against my eardrums. “Try to make the elf swear,” they cried while tossing my hat over my head in a sick game of elf in the middle. My hat jingled quietly for help, and finally I had to wrench it free from a pimply kid wearing a Pokemon T-shirt. Some old ladies gasped and shook their fingers at me as I stormed off.

I made my way back to H.Q. and reported in to Sam, a gelatinous man who always seemed to be sitting down and perpetually has some powdered sugar at the corner of his mouth. “Needlepoint...Needlepoint...” He mutters as his finger traced down the pages of names on his mighty clipboard. “Here ya are!” He put a check next to my name signifying that my 3rd and final break of the day was indeed used. “Pop a squat, ELF.” Rather than pick a fight with the jerk, I walked past him and into the room.

Some elves sat at a makeshift table, constructed from orange cones and a nearly rotted-through ping-pong table. They were playing cards and asked if I wanted to be dealt in. I politely declined, explaining that I needed every cent I made to pay my credit card bills, but the one who was dealer at the moment didn’t want to hear it. His nametag announced that his name was “Twinkle-Toes,” but I had a feeling that if anyone ever called him that, they’d be truly sorry. He put his cards face down on the table and leaned way back in his chair. The stubby cigar held between his yellowed teeth glowed intensely, illuminating his face and displaying his much-too-much later than five o’clock shadow. He took a drag and puffed out plumes of smoke without even touching the stogie with his hands.

“What’s the matter?” He spoke out of the corner of his mouth that was not clamped on the smoldering tobacco. “You tinks yous beddah dan us? Huh?” He managed to bite the words from the corner of his mouth while still clenching the cigar firmly between his teeth. A wave of fear blasted through my stomach, almost surely tearing the lining.

“No.” I managed to stammer. “I just don’t play cards.”

“We can teach you.” A crooked smile crept onto his lips. “Siddown.” It was more of an order than an invitation now. I approached the table with so much trepidation that my bells told the story to anyone watching.

Just before I slid into the seat, a white-gloved hand grabbed me around my upper arm and gently, but firmly yanked me back to a standing position. “Why don’t you come sit with us,” a deep voice I recognized said. I turned away from the card players’ twisting lips and looked at the man the voice belonged to. It was George, one of the many Santa’s employed at the mall. His sharp blue eyes twinkled behind the tiny glassless glasses balanced at the end of his nose. “You boys won’t miss my pal here will ya?” Some grumbling escaped the card sharks’ lips and they went back to their game. George led the way to a folding table on the other side of the room.

We sat down with three other elves and I relaxed a bit. The elf to my left, named Juniper, was a man roughly in his late ‘30s. He sat with his lunch in front of him on a brown paper bag. His large bald spot flashed each time he bent to take another bite of his egg salad sandwich. The elf across from me was one of the few women I had seen employed as an elf at the mall. She had dark hair, and nice eyes, but her incessant scratching drove my attention away rather quickly. The last elf was a kid who couldn’t have been more than 17. He didn’t seem to have a nametag at all. George sat next to me, his arms crossed.

“Thanks, those guys are bad news,” I humbly thanked George. “I need every cent of this paycheck if I want to pay my bills and be able to get my son something decent for the holidays.”

“Anytime.” George put a finger to his nose and whisked it at me while winking an eye.

“I know what you mean,” Juniper said, spraying some egg onto his chest and bulbous stomach. “It’s funny, the older my kids get, the more expensive their presents are.” Satisfied with his contribution, he turned his attention back to the sandwich.

“Where’s your nametag,” I asked the kid.

“Oh, I don’t wear it in here. My name’s Crochet, but those assholes over there,” he nodded to my friends playing cards, “keep calling me crotchty.”

The woman across from me was still violently scratching at her legs. “What’s the matter...Scotch-Tape?” I asked, pausing to read her nametag.

“I’m allergic to these stockings,” she managed between scratches. “But it’s weird, it’s only the red ones. I specifically asked for green ones.”

“Well, quit scratching. You’re givin’ me agita.” Juniper pleaded. “Besides, it just makes it worse.”

“Easy for you to say, she whimpered. “You’ve got green tights.” An especially scratch filled moment passed. “Maybe we could trade?”

“Not on your life, sister.” Juniper exclaimed. “How do I know why you’re really itching? Hmm?”

“Take that back!” Scotch-Tape was livid. The other elves in the room began to look this way. Something had to be done.

“Hey!” I got their attention. “I’ll trade you my tights, I wanted red anyway.” Then she actually beamed at me. She scrunched up in the chair, and then threw her tights across the table to me. Some guys whistled but she seemed not to care. She explained that she always wore spandex shorts anyway so whatever floated their boat. I tossed my own tights to her and without the liberty of my own spandex, put the red ones on in a hurry. There were no catcalls. No sooner had I secured the waistband under my plastic belt, Sam yelled, “Hey NeedleDick!” I quickly excused myself and ran for my assignment. Quickly scratching my left shin and hoping no one noticed.

Sam tells me that I need to respond to a code yellow immediately. A code yellow is the result of a nervous child with a weak bladder who decides to let go at the instant he or she descends upon old Saint Nick’s lap. In the case of a code yellow, the Santa was whisked away and it was then my job as an elf to keep the screaming children and impatient parents at bay until a new Santa could be sneaked into place.

I ducked under the flaps of Santa’s tent and almost collided with a very angry and very urine-soaked Santa. He muttered curses under his breath as he was led away by four elves. They hovered around him like secret service agents concealing him from view. Letting kids see multiple Santas was highly discouraged by the establishment. If more than one was sighted at a time, it was grounds for discharge immediately without pay. I guess something like that could do quite a number on a kid’s psyche.

A radio attached to the belt of one of the two remaining elves crackled that a new Santa was en route, but wouldn’t arrive for at least ten minutes. It was time for action. I filled my lungs with stale tent air that still had a hint of urine in it and straightened my belt and hat. I nodded to “Powderpuff” who had the radio on his belt and he nodded back

in understanding. He pulled back the curtain and I leapt out towards the crowd wearing my largest “happy face.” Normally I would have gone right into a song after my dive roll, but today something was amiss. Seeing my ex-wife standing in line with our son on her hip and holding hands with a guy who couldn’t have been more than five years out of college was a bit of a surprise to say the least.

Instead of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, only dry wheezes and sputters came out of my mouth. The bells on my hat jingled, encouraging me to go on, but it was no use. The look on her face erased all thoughts of Christmas. Her mouth was in the shape of an O, and her perfectly tweezed eyebrows formed an upside-down V. My son recognized me as well and held out his arms and showed a pink gummy smile.

“Adam!?” She exclaimed. The crying children suddenly seemed to stop wailing and every eye stared.

“My name is Needlepoint,” I whispered.

Terri splayed her fingers across her face and said, “Jim, this is my ex-husband, Needlepoint.” The man extended his hand and I stared it down. The initial shock of my entrance must have begun to wear off because a couple of children deep in the crowd picked up their caterwauling where they left off.

“What are you doing here?” I heard myself ask.

“Jim and I are bringing Seth to see Santa.”

“But he’s Jewish,” I snarled between clenched teeth.

“I don’t want him to feel left out.” She snapped. Jim tried to pretend he was interested in the elaborate decorations of Santa’s house, but I could see his ears were turning a bright red.

“Where’s Santa!” An angry voice sounded from somewhere deep in the mob. A chorus of ‘yeahs’ followed. I tried to keep my cool.

“Santa is on the way, ladies and gentlemen. Even Santa has to use the bathroom sometimes.” A light chuckle danced throughout the scores of tired parents and their kids. “If you’ll all be patient, Santa should be back in ten minutes.” I made sure to elevate my voice on the word “Santa.” In elf training they tell you this soothes the angry parent. Boy, were they wrong. The shouting that ensued was deafening. All the parents obviously needed to vent their anger, but with their children on hand they had to resort to

fifth-grade insults. After the seventh or eighth time I was called a ‘Doody head,’ I raised my arms for quiet.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I promise you that Santa will return very shortly, he’s a personal friend of mine, and I know he wouldn’t let anyone down. Thank you,” I added, hoping that another din of insults could be avoided.

I turned back to face Terri and Seth...and Jim. The sound of the name curdled in my stomach. I have always hated that name.

“Terri, could you please leave?” I pleaded.

“Why?” I looked to my son and noticed that he almost had a full head of corn silk hair now. It shone under the bright mall lighting.

“Because I don’t want Seth to see me like this.”

“Well, maybe if you were a responsible parent he’d see you at all.” She was cruel but not wrong. Seth began to cry softly. He hated when we fought.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized emphatically, “but it’s not my fault...” She cut me off.

“Enough Adam! I’ve heard it all before. You HAD to quit your job...”

“You know I was being pigeonholed...”

“And you HAD to have an affair with that slut at the office. Well, I HAVE to tell you to get lost.”

Jim finally decided that he needed to assert himself. He put an arm around Terri and said, “Back off, bud,” or “Beat it.” However, I didn’t quite catch it because as soon as I saw his arm stretch out, I leapt at him in a blind jingling fury.

Brilliant white flashed before my eyes each time Jim clobbered my face. Somewhere in the distance I could hear Terri shouting at us to stop. Seth was now howling at the top of his lungs, and kids whimpered about the poor elf. Poor elf was right. This wasn’t worth ten bucks an hour.

Through one half-closed and blurry eye I could see Jim squatting over me, preparing to deliver the final blow. I wished he would hurry up. My entire face felt swollen and I was sure I could feel at least two teeth swimming in my mouth. I squeezed my one almost good eye shut and awaited the crunch of knuckles breaking cartilage, but it never happened. With my eyes shut all I could see was oscillating bright to dark light. I did however hear a deep resonating laughter from somewhere up and behind me.

I forced open my eye, which had already begun to crust over, and saw George standing in front of the tent with his fists on his hips laughing his best Santa laugh. The kids all cheered simultaneously. “Hey there, Needlepoint!” he thundered. “Is that meeeean man bothering you?” I nodded weakly. George played well to audiences, which must be why this was his tenth year performing as Santa. George paced a bit as he said, “Let me check my list.” He struck a pose with an enormously long roll of paper that flittered to the ground, then rolled several feet. He hmm’d and grunted as he looked over the list, which surely was blank, or filled with gibberish. Finally he spoke, staring at Jim. “It looks like you’ve been a bad boy this year. I can’t have bad boys bothering my workers. What should we do about it?” He sounded like a pro wrestler inciting the audience. The kids screamed for justice and blood. Jim started to back away. “Ok elves!” George’s face suddenly became very serious behind his white beard and beady glasses. His eyes narrowed and gave a signal with one gloved hand.

Overworked and underpaid men and women wearing green and red holiday cheer ran in from all fronts; a chorus of bells jingled and jangled from the curled toes of each shoe. They pounced on Jim and knocked him to the ground. He screamed and kicked at my coworkers but he was thoroughly outnumbered. The crowd applauded when Jim was hauled to a makeshift sleigh that used to be a golf cart and was now used to transport exhausted Santas at the end of the day. I suppose they thought it was all part of the show. When he called for help they only booed him in response.

It was over so quickly. It reminded me of footage one might see in a documentary on what happens when a side of beef is dropped into piranha-infested waters. “Who’s here to see Santa?” George directed the attention back to himself. The mob surged forward and he scooped up a little blonde girl wearing a brown corduroy dress. He walked toward the tent with her parents in tow and just before going inside, threw a wink my way.

I looked to where Terri and Seth had been standing, but she was no longer standing there. The crowd had parted for her and she was almost running towards the exit. Seth bounced on her shoulder and I could see he was looking at me. I grinned, revealing the gaps in my smile and bent my fingers in a tiny wave. He smiled back and then was gone.

The next thing I knew, I was being lifted to my feet by Juniper and Scotch-Tape.
“You alright man?” Juniper asked. He whistled through his teeth as he took in the mess that was my face.

“Yeah,” I coughed, “I think I’ll make it.”

“Hey, I know a good lawyer if you want to put that guy’s ass in the can.”

“No thanks Juniper...”

“Joe.”

“Joe. I just want to get some ice.” We walked in a sort of six legged relay race over to H.Q. Sam paused with his doughnut aloft as we trudged through the door and some flecks snowed onto his belly. We sat at the same table as we had earlier and Joe ran to get me some ice.

“So your name’s Adam?” Scotch-Tape asked.

“Might be,” I replied. “Who’s asking?”

“Rebecca.” She smiled sweetly and a dimple appeared on her right cheek. I hadn’t noticed her smile before.

“Nice to meet you.” We shook hands over the table briefly, and when she obligingly scratched an itch I had on my inner thigh with her toe, I felt better than I had in weeks.